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Kristen Oxford:

Hello there, and welcome back to the Voices of Greater Yellowstone, where we share the stories and science of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. I'm your host, Kristen Oxford. On today's episode, we're taking a good hard look at the history of fighting gold mining on the northern border of Yellowstone National Park. And we're talking about the Greater Yellowstone Coalition's ambitious new plan to eliminate the last real and significant gold mine threat to this vitally important corner of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Directly on the northern edge of Yellowstone National Park, Crevice Mountain rises some 3000 feet above the Yellowstone River. Cloaked in conifer forests, and rich in wildlife, Crevice Mountain and the surrounding landscape are a prime example of what makes the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem so extraordinary. The area provides vital habitat for grizzly bears, is an important migration corridor for elk, mule deer, and big horn sheep, and is one of the few designated places outside the park where Yellowstone bison can roam.

Now imagine a full scale gold mining operation right in the middle of this wild landscape. That's exactly what's in store for Crevice Mountain. New roads, clear cuts blasting, heavy equipment traffic, and a host of other industrial activities would permanently scar the landscape, and negatively affect the wildlife that depend on this remote habitat. On top of that, industrial gold mining is a notoriously dirty and destructive activity with the potential to severely impact water quality. And in this case, that means the health of the Yellowstone River. But the potential impacts don't stop at the environment. A gold mine on Crevice Mountain would be visible from the Roosevelt Arch and much of northern Yellowstone.

As the communities adjacent to the park have been saying for years, Yellowstone is no place for a gold mine. So how do we stop a gold mine? On this episode, we sit down with Scott Christensen, the executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. Scott and the GYC team are taking on the substantial challenge of preventing Crevice Mountain from being mined. Join us as we discuss GYC's history of stopping mines near Yellowstone, the background behind this new mining threat on Crevice Mountain, and what Scott and the GYC team are doing to put an end to mining on the Yellowstone border once and for all.

Scott Christensen:

I'm Scott Christensen, I'm the executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. And I work with an amazing staff of talented and passionate people who are getting up and coming to work each day to try and protect and conserve this amazing Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Kristen Oxford:

Awesome. Tell us a little bit about your journey. How did you find yourself here?

Scott Christensen:

I grew up mostly in Idaho and Utah. And so, spent a lot of my childhood running around different parts of Greater Yellowstone. And have deep family ties, especially to eastern Idaho. And I think growing up and spending a lot of time outdoors in a place like Greater Yellowstone, I think you almost can't help but fall in love with it. And so it certainly had a big impact on me growing up. And as I got older and thought

about what I wanted to do for my career, and it kind of became clear to me over time that I wanted to be involved some way in the decision making that influenced this place I love so much. And so I spent years in college and afterwards trying to find a way into something like this. And was fortunate enough to land at GYC in 2003.

Kristen Oxford:

Okay. It's been a minute.

Scott Christensen:

It's been a minute. Yeah, it's been a quick 20 years. But the people and the place I still every day find so compelling and it just makes me feel so fortunate to be able to get up and come to work every day at a place like GYC. Such a compelling mission and such great people.

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah, I couldn't agree more with that. So you spend a lot of time out in the GYE in your formative years. How do you spend time now when you're not working?

Scott Christensen:

Well, I have a family that keeps me pretty busy. I have four kids who are actively engaged in all sorts of different things that keep me really busy. And fortunately, they're into some of the same things that I like to do when I'm not at work, like running rivers, and backpacking, and spending time at our family place down in eastern Idaho. So I get to when I'm not at work, spend time with my family in this amazing place. Hopefully, mostly having type one fun and less of maybe the type two forced family fun that sometimes comes along with hiking in a snow storm in June in Greater Yellowstone.

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah. A good friend of mine likes to say it doesn't have to be fun to be fun. But it does help if it is actually fun.

Scott Christensen:

Especially if you have teenagers in tow.

Kristen Oxford:

I can only imagine. So Scott, we're here today to chat about a specific gold mine that has been proposed for the northern border of Yellowstone National Park. But first I kind of want to get into talking a little bit about GYC's history fighting mines, because one thing that we always like to say here is that mine fighting is in GYC's DNA. So can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Scott Christensen:

Yeah, so Greater Yellowstone is a landscape with a pretty unique geology. So a lot of folks have heard about the Yellowstone super volcano or the Yellowstone hotspot, the geology that that's here has produced a lot of mineralization. That means that there's a lot of minerals underground that are economically valuable. And so mining has been a part of the history of this region for a long, long time. Going back to early to mid 1800s. And so fast forward to our time today, there's still interest in mining in this region. And one of the big campaigns that really put GYC on the map in the mid 1990s revolved

around a proposed gold mine near Cook City, the New World Mine. And at that time, thanks to some great leadership by folks like Mike Clark, and Dwight Minton, and others, they ran a very successful national campaign to shine attention, shine light, and attention on this mining proposal right on the northeast corner of Yellowstone.

And that led to an agreement that the organization helped broker between the mining company, and the government, and really the local community that resulted in the proposed mine being averted and the company being able to walk away from that through things like a land exchange, and some funding that made the company whole. And so going back to those formative years of GYC and scoring a big national victory that, really put the organization on the map. And that carries forward today. I think the work that we're doing today related to mining in the region really is a part of our legacy. We're building on that legacy. And you get two things colliding like Yellowstone, the world's first national park, with the fact that there're valuable minerals underground. That's the perfect place for GYC to work in the middle of. And it's complicated and challenging, but it's partly why we exist as an organization.

Kristen Oxford:

Another milestone victory in GYC's history fighting mines revolves around the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act, which is something that GYC was heavily involved in with a lot of partners around the region. Can you tell us a little bit about the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act?

Scott Christensen:

Yeah, so if you go back to 2015, there were two proposed gold mines that showed up north of Yellowstone, one in the Paradise Valley, and one right on the boundary of the park above Gardiner. And GYC and great local partners in the Paradise Valley, and really the whole community rallied together to oppose those two mines. And that led to a big public campaign that secured some really important milestones along the way, the biggest of which being passage of the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act. And that piece of legislation that was signed in 2019 protected over 30,000 acres from mining. And importantly, it dealt with the public lands that were threatened by mining. But it was a huge victory for the community, for GYC, and for the values that we are fighting for.

Kristen Oxford:

So back to today, the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act landmark victory protecting lots of public lands north of Yellowstone. So why are we still dealing with an issue like a mine on the northern border of Yellowstone today?

Scott Christensen:

Good question. So as I mentioned, the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act protected the public lands that were threatened by these two mining proposals. And at one of the locations, Crevice Mountain, right on the boundary of the park, there are enough contiguous private lands, a little over 300 acres that provide a large enough footprint that the mining company that would like to mine there can move forward. And so we knew that when the legislation passed, we would have to circle back to address this threat that is on private land on the boundary of Yellowstone.

Kristen Oxford:

Okay. So today we're dealing with the threat of a proposed gold mine on roughly 300 acres of private land on Crevice Mountain. Can you tell us a little bit more about that area? Can you describe the proposed mine site for us?

Scott Christensen:

Crevice Mountain sits right on the northern boundary of Yellowstone just above the town of Gardiner. And so if you're standing in Gardiner in front of the Roosevelt Arch looking in towards the park, the mountain you see just up into your left is Crevice Mountain. So it's really visible. It's right there on the boundary. It overlooks the Yellowstone River. It's squarely in the middle of occupied grizzly bear habitat, as well as the wildlife migration corridor for the Northern range elk herd in Yellowstone. It has big horn sheep, mule deer, bison. It has all of the species you would expect to see in Yellowstone running around on it. And so it's just a critically important part of the region here from a wildlife perspective, from a water quality perspective, and then just from a visitor experience perspective because of how visible it is.

Kristen Oxford:

So GYC has had trail cameras set up for a while now in that area, throughout that area. What are some of the things that we've seen on the footage we've captured there?

Scott Christensen:

Yeah, this has been one of the fun parts of this project is that in the course of trying to stop this mine from moving forward, we purchased 14 acres on the mountain and have gone up and put trail cameras in place. And we see in the images from those cameras, kind of everything you would expect to see from grizzly bears, a big mama grizz with a couple of cubs in tow, to lots of elk, mountain lions, deer, everything you would expect to see moving around up there. And so it's been fun to see animals moving around in a natural way, and during the times of day when us people aren't running around on the mountain. I think more than anything else, it's further justified our belief that from a wildlife perspective, this is a really important part of our region.

Kristen Oxford:

So on Crevice Mountain, we see kind of all the iconic Yellowstone wildlife that you might expect to see. Crevice itself is perched squarely above the Yellowstone River, right on the border of the park. Connect the dots for us, ecologically speaking, what kind of impact could we expect a gold mine on a site like this to have on the mine site itself and kind of the area directly around it?

Scott Christensen:

Right. Because of the impacts that mining brings with it, it has a really outsized effect on the lands and waters around it. So for example, the mine site is perched on a slope right above the Yellowstone River. And one of the very common problems that follow this type of mine is acid mine drainage. So when water comes into contact with the minerals that are being pulled up from underground, and creates a really toxic pollution source. And so the Yellowstone River is our longest river, that's undamed, left in the lower 48. You could imagine downstream impacts for dozens or maybe hundreds of miles downstream. From a wildlife standpoint, any location that's a bottleneck or a critical part of a migration corridor, that disruption or blockage has a huge impact, obviously, on a herd's ability to access its summer or winter range. Imagine being a visitor to Yellowstone and showing up in Lamar Valley in the summer and saying, Well, where are all the elk?"

And so this type of activity proposed at this specific location really has an outsized impact based on the size of this proposal. The last thing I'll mention is just from the perspective of the gateway community of Gardiner and the Paradise Valley, you have to imagine things like all of the large truck traffic coming through town and moving up and down the valley. All of the heavy equipment necessary that has to get up on the mountain, the blasting, the lights, everything that comes with it, obviously, has a huge impact on neighbors and local community, things like tourism. And so I think about it as having a really outsized impact because of the use and the location.

Kristen Oxford:

Right. So if you were a visitor who was going to go through the northern entrance of the park in summertime through Gardiner, would you know that there was a mine there? I mean apart from maybe wondering where all the elk were in Lamar Valley, would you be able to see the site? What would that experience be like for visitors?

Scott Christensen:

Yeah, so the site would be pretty visible as the footprint expanded over time and the mine was developed, it would obviously get larger and larger, and become more and more visible. But because of the location of Crevice Mountain and the aspect of the peak that this mine is proposed on, it looks directly down onto Gardiner in the northern part of the park. And so, another good vantage point of it would be if you were hiking across the Blacktail Trail in Yellowstone, a really popular and well-used trail for a good chunk of the first couple miles of that trail, you're hiking right at Crevice Mountain. It's right in your view as you're walking. And you would look up and see that scar up on the mountain. So it's real, it's right there.

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah. And you've been out to the mine site yourself, right?

Scott Christensen:

Yeah.

Kristen Oxford:

What's it like to stand there and kind of see that it's intact right now and imagine what it could be like?

Scott Christensen:

Yeah, I mean the most striking thing about it is the amazing view you have from Crevice Mountain across the northern half of Yellowstone. And on a really clear day, you can see the Tetons in the distance.

Kristen Oxford:

Wow.

Scott Christensen:

So it's an incredible vantage point, which also means it's really visible from a lot of the area down country and lower elevation. So that's the most striking thing for me. I mean, secondly, it's in a sea of wild protected lands. And so it's very striking as well to stand there and think, how could a mine be developed here? What if a mine were to be developed here? It would be incredibly disruptive and out of

character, of course, with this amazing wild landscape around it. And so it's as wild and quiet a place as you're going to find on the edge of Yellowstone.

Kristen Oxford:

So it seems pretty clear that a mine on Crevice Mountain with all the potential for disruption, pollution, habitat loss that could occur is not compatible with GYC's vision for the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. So what are we going to do about it?

Scott Christensen:

Well, when we knew that we would have to come back and address this mining threat on the boundary of the park. We knew that our options were pretty limited. It's proposed on private land. There's no real federal nexus and ability for us to really get involved in it from a legal aspect. And so as the mining company was moving forward, we were running out of options for how to stop this. And we finally came to a point where we decided we need to intervene and we need to get creative. And so we approached the company and we said, "What's it going to take for you to walk away from this?"

Kristen Oxford:

And what'd they say?

Scott Christensen:

Once they realized who we were and what our interests were in conserving Greater Yellowstone, we pretty quickly had a real conversation about the company's interest in the mine and the investments that they've made. This is for them many, many years of time and a lot of money invested in getting to the point that they have gotten to with trying to develop this mine. And so from their standpoint, they were deep into this project, and felt like there's a huge amount of value in the ground up there, the way they talk about it, hundreds of millions of dollars. And so then negotiations began of, well, what's a realistic value of this thing?

And as a nonprofit, we can't pay above fair market value, so we need to have a number to hang our hat on. So part of those negotiations and the due diligence that we did, it required us to hire mining experts and attorneys to help us come up with a fair number there. And over the course of a little over a year, we landed on this number of six and a quarter million dollars. And of course had to go back and forth with the company and finally, fortunately, were able to come to an agreement.

Kristen Oxford:

How are you feeling about it?

Scott Christensen:

Well, this is a big lift, there's no question. together with raising our annual operating budget, this project, it puts us in a place where we have to raise more than double what we have ever raised in a 12-month period. It's a huge stretch for us. But I weigh that against the idea of a gold mine on the boundary of Yellowstone. And that just simply cannot happen.

Kristen Oxford:

What happens if we fail? What does it look like? I'm sorry, I have to ask you that, but I do.

Scott Christensen:

My answer to that question is we cannot fail. The company has stated that if we can't pull this off, then they will mine. And that means for me that we cannot fail, and we will get there one way or another. But we're going to need a lot of help to do it. And I'm hopeful and I'm optimistic about it. But we are going to need a lot of help from people to reach our goal and to avoid a mine on the boundary of the park.

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah. And the GYC team has been working really hard to pull this off. Do you know how close we are as of today? Do you have the latest number for where we are on that journey to six and a quarter million dollars?

Scott Christensen:

I do. As of today, we're just over \$4 million.

Kristen Oxford:

Awesome.

Scott Christensen:

So we're making good progress. We have until October 1st 2023. So there's obviously a real sense of urgency. And I wish people who are listening to this podcast could follow our staff around who have been working on this and just see the time and effort, and sleepless nights that have gone into this. It's been a huge effort across our whole team and staff that I'm just so proud of. But some days just seeing the concern on people's faces may be coupled with the excitement that, "Hey, we're in a position to even take a swing at this." It feels big and it's exciting. And fortunately, there's a lot of people out there who care about Yellowstone just like we do.

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So assuming the best, we rock this, we pull it off, what happens after the money's raised? Functionally, what occurs once we actually can say, "Yes, we're going to buy this mineral estate?"

Scott Christensen:

So there's a few steps to this process. Step one is to address the company and to get them out of the picture. And to do that, of course, we need to raise the \$6.25 million. When we do that, we will buy from them. We will come into ownership of the mineral rights, the mining leases, the claims that they've staked, the proprietary mining operation, or mining data and plans that they've assembled over time, the mining permit that they have from the state of Montana, all of their assets essentially. And that on day one, that removes this immediate threat of mining on the boundary of the park. Our work is not done yet at that point. So we also want to make sure that long term we remove the threat of mining on the boundary of the park, or of any other large scale development or industrial activity at this location.

So we're beginning to work with the private landowners on the mountain with an ultimate goal of seeing these lands transferred into public ownership. And the reason that's important is because a provision in the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act says that private lands that come into public ownership after the bill passed are forever protected from mining. And so ultimately, our goal here is to

ensure that these lands come into public ownership, they're accessible to the public, and forever protected.

Kristen Oxford:

What makes you hopeful about this campaign?

Scott Christensen:

I'm hopeful because I know that there are a lot of people that care about this place. And I know that when push comes to shove, many of those people will step up and contribute and help us. And that gives me a lot of hope. I'm also hopeful because we've had great support to this point and it's within reach. The finish line is out there. We all see it. We're getting closer every day. We still need a lot of help. But we've had great support to this point where over 60% of the way there, and that gives me a lot of hope. I guess the last thing I'd say is that I feel a lot of hope and encouragement, not only from the external people that are supporting this effort, but because of the team here at GYC and how all in they are. And that includes our board as well. Working with a board that has been unflinching on this project has made a huge difference. And as we all know, having the right team in place makes the impossible feel possible and we'll get there.

Kristen Oxford:

So we are not at the finish line yet, but it's already taken a lot of work to get us where we are. Can you just give us a peek behind the scenes into some of the few things that have been happening to get us where we are today?

Scott Christensen:

Well, if I could count up all the mileage that our staff has put into this from Bozeman over to Paradise Valley, down to Gardiner, many, many trips down around the project location. People like Joe Josephson on our staff have been instrumental in that. And then all of the folks that have donated their time and talents to this effort. Photography, for example, from people like Bill Campbell and others. All that's quiet work behind the scenes that people don't get to see until it's out there live and for the public. And it takes a tremendous amount of work to do something like tee up an agreement with a mining company, for example. Or get just the right shot of the mountain using a camera that helps people grasp really how close this is to Yellowstone and what kind of impacts it could have. I think about some of the local landowners who have been with us from the beginning, fighting these proposed mines and who have been willing to help us out in myriad ways.

People like Lynn Chan or others down in the Gardiner Basin who we show up to say hello, and they invite us in for lunch. And they help us figure out who lives where and how to get in contact with people and all of that. So with a big effort like this, it's hard to overstate really how much time and effort goes into it behind the scenes before you read about it in the Washington Post or the Bozeman Daily Chronicle. It's a long road to get to that point. And a lot of people deserve a huge amount of thanks for everything they've put into it. And when we get there, we'll certainly celebrate every one of them.

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah. If anyone listening wants to be one of those people and help us with this really ambitious project, how can they get involved?



Scott Christensen:

Yeah, a few different ways. I mean first and foremost, please contribute. You can jump on our website and really quickly and easily make a donation specifically to this project. Second, please share this effort with your networks. Do that online, do that through word of mouth, whatever it takes to help get the word out. We're relying on everybody who's aware of this project to help us grow the circle. And hopefully, bring in new gifts from people who can help get us to the finish line. And I guess third, yeah, I would ask people the next time you visit Yellowstone, to take a minute to think about what would it be like if they were a mine on the boundary of the park? What does it take to stop something like that from happening? Obviously, a lot of work and a lot of money.

And I just think that we can't take anything for granted in this day and age. And the fact that there are more people here than ever in the region, more visitors coming here than ever, means that we need to be thoughtful and careful about how we manage this place and what kind of uses get permitted where. And so yeah, next time you're here visiting Yellowstone, just take a minute and think about what led to this amazing, beautiful place that you're staring at, and what could potentially harm it in the future? And how can you make a difference?

Kristen Oxford:

Yeah, beautiful. Thank you, Scott. We have got our standard question that we asked to all of our podcast guests. We're going to ask you as well, do you have a conservation hero?

Scott Christensen:

Yes. So my conservation hero is my great-grandfather. I only met him as a toddler, so sadly I didn't get to know him well before he passed away. But he was hired in the early days of the Forest Service in central Utah, at a time when things like timber harvest, and predator control, and other issues were top of mind for this brand new agency that had just been formed. And as I've learned more about him as I've gotten older, his name was Ham Christensen. His parents were born in Denmark. And he became a forest ranger down there and had to deal head on with basically overuse of resources at a time when that was a foreign concept. Everything seemed pretty unlimited. So my conservation hero is for stranger ham. He's kind of a trailblazer for public lands management, and I'm proud to say he is part of my family heritage.

Kristen Oxford:

Perfect. Thanks for sharing that with us. Scott, if you could leave people with just one parting thought on the importance of stopping this mine, what would it be?

Scott Christensen:

My parting thought would be that this is an urgent, urgent cause. And the clock is ticking. Every day I wake up feeling a real sense of urgency, knowing we have a deadline October 1st to get this done. And so if there's one thing that I could impart, is that I hope others feel that sense of urgency with me. And beyond everything we've talked about today about the impacts to wildlife, and the Yellowstone River, and National Park itself, please join us. Step up and do it, and do it today. Make a gift. Get involved partly out of a sense of urgency. Time is running out and we need your help to get there. And each person can make a difference on this effort. And I hope that everyone who gets involved with this can share that feeling of creating a lasting legacy for Yellowstone National Park. That's certainly what I feel.

And a project like this, I think, has the power to impart that feeling to everybody who steps up and plays a role in getting us across the finish line.

Kristen Oxford:

Absolutely. Scott, thank you so much for all your hard work on this really huge campaign. And thanks for sitting down with us today. We appreciate it.

Scott Christensen:

Absolutely.

Kristen Oxford:

A huge thank you to Scott Christensen for stopping by and sharing the story of this looming risk to Yellowstone National Park. At the point of this recording, in mid-May of 2023, GYC has raised over half the funds needed to buy out the mineral rights leases and claims on Crevice Mountain. If you love Yellowstone or this story resonates with you in any way, please consider donating to this campaign and becoming part of the legacy of stopping mines in this remarkable landscape. We also currently have a supremely generous donation match from the Mennen Environmental Foundation that doubles any gift we receive up to \$50,000. So if you give 50 bucks today, GYC receives a hundred, \$200 becomes \$400, and so on. Like Scott said, the urgency of this campaign cannot be overstated with the deadline of October 1st, 2023 on the horizon. Together we can extinguish the last real and significant mining threat remaining on the border of Yellowstone National Park once and for all, and prove that Yellowstone is more valuable than gold to make a gift.

Head over to the show notes of this episode and there is a link to donate. If you'd rather mail in a donation, learn more about that campaign and your other options to give, or get in touch with GYC's director of philanthropy, all of that information can be found in the show notes as well. If giving is not in your capacity right now, we'd love for you to share the news about this issue far and wide. We so appreciate any support you can lend to this crucial effort. The Voices of Greater Yellowstone Podcast is produced by The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to working with all people to protect the lands, waters, and wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Thank you for your support and we'll see you next time.